The Black Church and Youth Education in St. Paul

by Yvette Lashone Pye

In their effort to rise from the bottom rung of the economic ladder, Black parents have traditionally placed greater confidence in the educational system than in any other social institution or process in American society. However, that confidence was and continues to be misplaced because of ineffectual schools, particularly in inner cities. It is well documented that young people of color tend to do significantly less well than their White counterparts on federally mandated standardized state tests. In their book *Urban Sanctuaries* (1994), education researchers Milbrey McLaughlin et al. note that inside the "hellish vortex of gangs and drugs" are young people who count on local institutions such as the Black Church as "safe havens" to improve their life chances.

This article summarizes a study of how churches in St. Paul's Summit-University community define and respond to the perceived and actual educational needs of local African American young people. The study focused on the Black Church as a community resource that historically has played a leadership role with respect to youth, especially on education. I chose Summit-University, which is part of the historic Rondo neighborhood, as the focus for this research for two reasons: It has one of the highest concentrations of people of color and schools of color—particularly African American—in the Twin Cities (Figure 1); and Rondo historically has been home to churches, community organizations, and other institutions that have primarily served Black residents. Those institutions have remained in place despite shifts in population and boundaries, providing a social context that still shapes the present-day Summit-University community. This project was part of my doctoral dissertation research in the Department of Geography at the University of Minnesota, and was supported in part by a John R. Borchert Fellowship from CURA.

Methodology

St. Paul's Summit-University community (City of St. Paul Planning District 8) is located west of downtown St. Paul. It is bounded on the north

Unity Baptist Church, a historic Black church in the Summit-University community in St. Paul.

and south by University and Summit Avenues, respectively; and on the east and west by Marion Street and Lexington Parkway, respectively. There are currently fourteen Black churches located within the Summit-University neighborhood (Figure 2).[1]

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[1] Another Black church, New Vision Faith Centre, recently relocated out of the neighborhood.

Figure 1. Percentage of School-Aged Children* in St. Paul Who Are African American, 2000

more than 42.5%
23.7%–42.5%
7.8%–23.6%
less than 7.8%

Detail Area for Figure 2
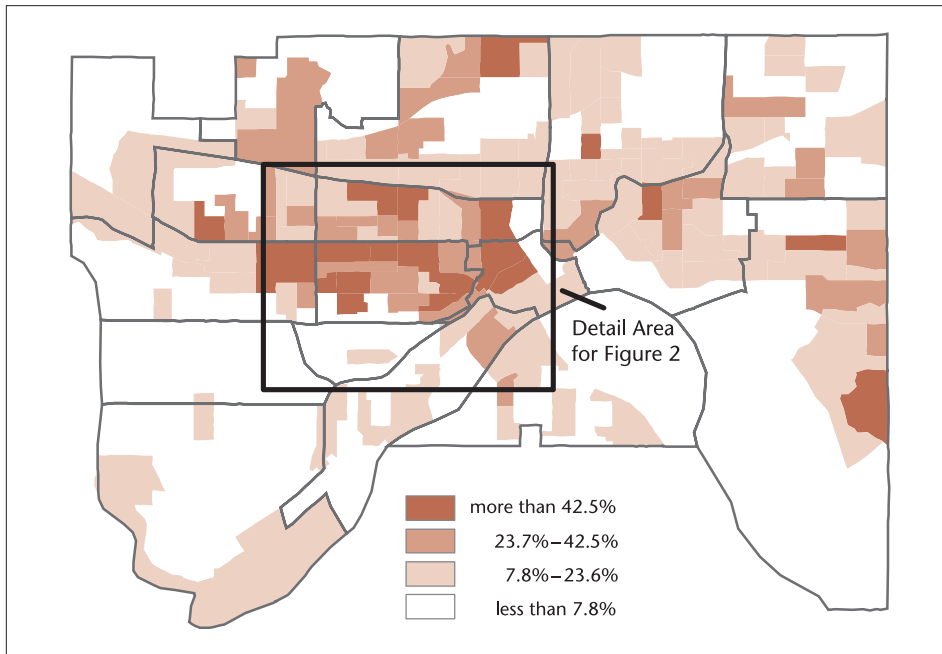
Source: 2000 U.S. Census

* School-aged children are those aged 5 to 17.

Figure 2. Location of Black Churches in the Summit-University Neighborhood

Source: 2000 U.S. Census

1. Antioch Christian Center
2. Battle Temple Church of God in Christ
3. Camphor Memorial United Methodist Church
4. First Trinity Church of God in Christ
5. Morning Star Baptist Church
6. Mt. Olivet Baptist Church
7. Pilgrim Baptist Church

8. River of Life Christian Church
9. Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church
10. St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church
11. St. Paul City Church
12. St. Peter Claver Catholic Church
13. St. Phillip's Episcopal Church
14. Unity Baptist Church

As part of my research, I interviewed pastors, youth pastors, and community stakeholders at churches in Summit-University to gain a better understanding of whether and how the Black Church supports African American youths' educational advancement. I conducted face-to-face one-hour interviews with 14 adults who occupied the position of pastor or youth pastor/coordinator in each of the Black churches identified. The four main themes in the interview protocol included the following:

▶ the young people in the congregation
▶ views of local young people (aged 12–22)
▶ local youth programs and activities
▶ educational needs and wants of young people

The structured face-to-face interview protocol was developed to examine the churches' involvement with youth aged 12–22. I wanted to get a sense of the church populations in that age range, and the churches' outreach to local non-church youth. I also wanted to ascertain whether churches were knowledgeable about youth educational/academic needs, and to what degree they were addressing those needs, if at all. The surveys were used to collect most of the quantitative data.

Church Participation in Academic Programs for Black Youth in Summit-University

According to my interview data, Black churches in Summit-University are aware of the dismal state of African American student achievement and of the failures of schools to address this problem. Black congregations in the community have responded to this crisis in various ways, ranging from church participation, sponsorship, and support of youth-oriented programs or (in one case) full academic involvement through a church-run school, to no observable programs or activities at other churches.

On the whole, my analysis indicates that Black churches are less involved in supporting young African Americans academically than they might be, and could do much more to provide educational support to youth in the community. In this section, I describe the nature of Black churches' academic support roles in Summit-University.

Youth Programs. Of the 14 Black churches in Summit-University, a few Black congregations are taking concrete steps to address the academic needs of local youth, but others do very little (Table 1). Some Black churches offer youth-oriented programs and activities that are academic in nature (i.e., assistance with school-related skill sets), but other programs primarily provide recreational or enrichment

Table 1. Youth Enrichment and Academic Programs/Activities at Black Churches in Summit-University, 2005

Name	Youth Enrichment Programs/Activities	Academic Programs/ Activities	Total Youth Participation 2003	Total Youth Participation 2004
Antioch Christian Center	basketball court and tournament	—	73	111
Battle Temple Church of God in Christ	quilting	—	—	15
Camphor Memorial United Methodist	UJIMA Healthy Youth Development Program	Project SPIRIT	—	245
First Trinity Church of God in Christ	—	—	—	—
Morning Star Baptist Church	Walker West Music Academy	Walker West Music Academy	92	87
Mt. Olivet Baptist Church	Lab School	Project SPIRIT, Freedom School, Chosen to Achieve, College Prep	240	280
Pilgrim Baptist Church	Scouts, Rites of Passage, Family Night	Chosen to Achieve	55	25
River of Life Christian Church	—	—	—	—
Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church	Girl Scouts	—	no data provided	no data provided
St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church	Youth Fridays, Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts	Chosen to Achieve	no data provided	no data provided
St. Paul City Church	—	—	—	—
St. Peter Claver Catholic Church	Scouts	St. Peter Claver School (parochial)	no data provided	no data provided
St. Phillip's Episcopal Church	—	—	—	—
Unity Baptist Church	—	—	—	—

Source: Interview and Survey Data

activities (i.e., quilting, Rites of Passage, Boy Scouts). Of the 14 churches, 9 (64%) do not have a strict participatory relationship or run a youth program, but all (100%) have at least a Sunday School program where some reading activities take place. Half of the churches (7 of 14) have youth pastors/coordinators, whose roles range from acting as facilitators to serving as teachers or instructors. For example, Antioch's youth pastor facilitates the church's basketball tournament, providing logistics and publicity, whereas Morning Star's pastor teaches young people to read and play music.

Academic Programs. Formally, five churches (Camphor, St. James, Pilgrim, Morning Star, and Mt. Olivet) are actively involved in community-wide academic programs. Four of these five serve varying roles within two academic programs: Project SPIRIT, run by the St. Paul Area Council of Churches, and Chosen to Achieve, an initiative of St. Paul's Public Schools. All five support academic assistance efforts at local schools, encouraging their members to participate as tutors and mentors in academic support programs. These churches also assist local young people and area schools by offering physical space to host meetings for academic support initiatives.

Only one church I surveyed, St. Peter Claver Catholic Church, runs its own parochial school. None of the churches included in this study offer tutoring programs administrated by the churches, although two—St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church and Mt. Olivet Baptist Church—offer tutoring by appointment.

Youth participating in tutoring and mentoring programs have experienced improved academic achievement. Citywide, St. Paul's Project SPIRIT and Chosen to Achieve served 134 and 165 youth, respectively, in one year, with an increase in overall academic progress of 39% on school assessments during the first year.[2] Yet, more than 2,700 youth aged 12–22 resided in Summit-University in the year 2000—1,128 of whom were African American.

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[2] Based on Chosen to Achieve data; no data were available for Project SPIRIT.

Although some Black churches in the Summit-University community offer academic programs, others primarily provide youth-oriented enrichment activities such as the Eagles Wings project (pictured here), which is sponsored by Camphor Memorial United Methodist Church's UJIMA Healthy Youth Development Program.

Interview and survey data show that church leaders and members volunteer as tutors through Project SPIRIT and as mentors through Chosen to Achieve because local schools have expressed the need for tutoring and mentoring of African American children. Although most of these adults are not residents of Summit-University, they report that they serve in the community because the need is clearer here than in the neighborhoods where they currently live. Many grew up in or lived in Summit-University at one time. Although they now live elsewhere in the metro area, the community is still alive and real to them and they believe they "owe something to the community," particularly its youth.

Discussion

The Black Church in Summit-University plays a complementary support role, rather than a primary administrative role, in local African American youth's academic achievement. Essentially, the Black Church has limited its educational intervention to two academic initiatives: Project SPIRIT and Chosen to Achieve. How can we account for such limited responses to the widely acknowledged educational problems in the community? I would argue the limited response stems from the particularities of Summit-University and St. Paul.

Social Service Support Organizations. Historically, African Americans formed many vibrant community organizations in Summit-University and the larger Rondo neighborhood to address the needs of the Black population. Beginning in the 1940s, organizations such as the Hallie Q. Brown Community House, Jimmy Lee Recreation Center, Youth Service Coordinating Board, and Inner-City Youth League paved the way for neighborhood residents to become policy makers in the city's human and social service sectors. Through these various organizations, youth received academic assistance and cultural education not available in the public schools.

Since that time, African Americans who came out of those early community organizations have strategically penetrated the local public schools, police department, and other human and social service institutions throughout the city. The impressive mix of African American leaders who emerged from this community created a distinctive youth-oriented human and social service ecology in Summit-University that has continued to thrive to the present day. As a result, there is no one institution that people and youth look to in the community.

Whereas in some communities the Black Church must assume the role of advocate on behalf of local youth because no one else does, in St. Paul's Summit-University community, the Black Church operates within a very different context of strategic penetration rather than church-based activism. This has resulted in a somewhat limited response to the problem of academic achievement and a relatively

circumscribed engagement in church-based youth educational initiatives.

Geographic Dispersion. Despite the historically greater availability of social service assistance organizations in Summit-University, changes in the residential geography of St. Paul have undermined the effectiveness of these organizations in supporting local youth academically.

Black residents began moving out of Summit-University with the construction of Interstate 94 in the 1960s. Since that time, there has been a perceptible shift from "walk-to churches" to "drive-to churches." Interestingly, there is only one church (Antioch) that could be considered a walk-to church in 2005; the congregations of the remaining churches were largely made up of non–Summit-University residents. Of the other survey respondents, eight of nine (88%) reported their membership resided throughout the Twin Cities' metropolitan area, extending to Wisconsin. For example, many Camphor members live in the south suburbs, whereas most St. Phillip's members live in the north and northeast suburbs. Nevertheless, congregants return to Summit-University to attend church services, reflecting the continuing pull of the churches they, or their parents or grandparents, previously attended.

The shift to drive-to churches facilitated a shift in the spatial dynamics driving churches' academic involvement. I found evidence of a gradual shift from "philanthropy among friends" toward more institutional mechanisms for charitable giving, or "philanthropy among strangers," within the Black Church in Summit-University. Instead of academically assisting and mentoring young church members, Black churches assist anyone needing academic assistance locally—that is, students who attend Summit-University area schools and students throughout the St. Paul School District. For example, St. Peter Claver Elementary School's student population is not made up primarily of its members' children, but of local children regardless of church affiliation. Likewise, the students mentored in Chosen to Achieve are African American youth in middle schools who need assistance, regardless of church affiliation, and not primarily church members' children. Even though none of St. James' youth members were being mentored in Chosen to Achieve in 2005, five adult mentors of the church were participating in the program. Indeed, in the four Black churches involved with Project SPIRIT

and Chosen to Achieve, only nine of their youth members were tutored or mentored during 2005. Instead of the church serving as a place where young people get academic assistance, church members go to area schools to assist students academically. Thus, the geography of assistance also has shifted.

As the geography of assistance has shifted, transportation and access to quality youth program activities have become a concern for both church leaders and community stakeholders in Summit-University. Pastors expressed concern about the safety of youth who are willing to travel to programs throughout Summit-University and surrounding areas but who have no access to personal transportation during evening hours. There are continuing conversations among Black churches about coordinated transportation efforts to get youngsters safely to different programs throughout the community. Other community stakeholders believe Summit-University's youth face more difficulties in accessing available youth resources than youth in higher income communities.

Adjusting to the geographic shifts described above, Black churches now see themselves as serving African Americans in Summit-University and throughout the Twin Cities. According to interview and survey data, this is accomplished primarily through support of Black institutions and the St. Paul Public Schools. Black churches and related institutions in Summit-University clearly exhibit a sense of community, albeit not as strong as in the community's heyday. They all describe themselves as serving the various areas of the historic Rondo neighborhood, which includes Summit-University, Selby-Dale, Frog-town, and Midway. Reflecting this sense of community, churches feel that they are making a contribution to young people's education by serving as meeting places and by encouraging members to volunteer as tutors and mentors through Chosen to Achieve and Project SPIRIT.

Conclusions and Recommendations

My research shows that Black churches in St. Paul's Summit-University community have undertaken concrete measures to respond to the academic needs of local African American youth. All of the churches have mechanisms in place to encourage and celebrate youth achievement through Annual Graduation Sundays. One-fourth of the churches have formal academic tutoring and/or mentoring program

partnerships with local schools, most in coordination with Chosen to Achieve and Project SPIRIT. This amounts to a complementary and supportive role in the educational lives of young people rather than a primary role.

On one hand, this limited role can be traced to a philosophy of Black strategic penetration of educational institutions, dating back to the days of the historic Rondo neighborhood; on the other hand, it reflects the shift to drive-to churches and philanthropy among strangers, which have resulted from African American out-migration from the community.

However, the Summit-University's Black churches' traditional complementary and supportive role in the lives of young people is no longer sufficient to meet the educational needs of today's youth. Even with the positive academic assessment of St. Paul School's Chosen to Achieve program, the small number of students (165) impacted by the program in a single year is not significant in the context of Summit-University or the larger city of St. Paul. The impact of the Black Church in the educational lives of local youth through support of such programs is minimal and insignificant in light of their actual need. The gap between academic achievement of African Americans and their White counterparts is not closing fast enough to ensure educational equity. The evidence in this study suggests that if the Black Church in St. Paul intends to address the needs of local African American youth, it will need to change from its supportive role to one that is more proactive, broader, and deeper. Although proactive strategies by Black churches cannot by themselves overcome the racial divide in educational performance, I would suggest several ways that churches and other local institutions can contribute.

First, local institutions should collaborate with churches and schools on intentional and focused efforts at community youth development. At minimum, *community youth development* means providing youth with the opportunities to acquire a broad range of competencies and a full complement of positive connections to self, others, and the larger community.[3] Furthermore, community youth development

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[3] Francisco Villarruel, Daniel Perkins, Lynne Borden, and Joanne Keith, (eds.). *Community Youth Development: Programs, Policies, and Practices.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003.

Students who have participated in tutoring and mentoring programs sponsored by Black churches in St. Paul have experienced improved academic achievement. However, this study suggests that broader, more proactive approaches are necessary to address the educational needs of local African American youth.

involves engaging youth as partners in the process of positive youth development. This could be done by providing young people with sustained positive relationships with adults, and opportunities for new skills development and mastery. Finally, community youth development includes making communities better places for youth to live and thrive. Adults and schools could engage youth in exercises and projects that require youth to help make this happen through civic engagement.

For example, local businesses and industries, in conjunction with churches, community organizations, and schools, could band together to develop and implement more viable options for non–college-bound and college-bound local youth. All companies could be encouraged through tax incentives to establish and maintain vibrant, forward-looking recruitment, internship, and apprenticeship partnerships with schools at all grade levels. Collaborations are possible even at elementary grade levels through such

programs as career day presentations or the return of show-and-tell career presentations by parents, corporate employees, and community volunteers. One of the main goals of such partnerships would be to ensure state-of-the-art knowledge-curriculum preparation, more interested students, and a prepared workforce. This can be accomplished with collaboration between school and industry through resource personnel charged with establishing the goals and objectives of all interested parties.

Second, philanthropic foundational support for urban youth collaborative ventures is essential. Many inner-city churches and schools do not have budgets that allow for expanded youth programs. Philanthropic gifts are therefore necessary for schools and churches to provide young people with needed academic and developmental resources that can bridge institutions.

Schools and churches often have similar objectives and serve similar populations—they just don't tend to

work with one another effectively. Although the separation of church and state limits such partnerships, church-led adopt-a-school initiatives have had proven success in urban areas throughout the United States. For example, the National Parent Teacher Association and National Church Adopt-A-School Initiative have implemented a nationwide, comprehensive, faith-based strategy based on the Dallas (Texas) Project Turn Around model to address the spiritual and social needs of urban youth and families through a church and public school partnership. The strategy calls for an urban church to adopt a local central city public school. A suburban church would then partner with the urban church to provide a variety of supplemental support systems to deliver effective social services. By facilitating partnerships among urban churches, schools, and suburban churches, this plan seeks to address the multifaceted needs of at-risk children and families. To extend such programs, funds are needed for

resource personnel to administer and arrange evaluations and site visits, unburdening busy and often over-committed school, church, and corporate leaders while meeting the needs of young people living in urban centers.

Third, community youth development could be advanced by strengthening local families' access to and knowledge of available youth development resources. Churches, schools, and community organizations could pool their resources to assist parents in directing young people to social and educational support. For example, Summit-University churches could host roving family information forums supported by collaborative funding from local foundations, schools, and community organizations. Joint community efforts would not only build the capacity of individual families to negotiate the social world in which they and their children are situated, but also would build the social capacity of the community at large while simultaneously establishing needed social connections. Well-informed parents are more confident and better equipped to contend for resources for their children's success. Moreover, the retrenching of economic support for social and academic initiatives for youth, families, and communities requires local institutions to coordinate efforts to help youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Finally, continuously misplaced reliance on ill-equipped, overburdened schools will most severely impact African American youth living in inner-city communities, especially in Minnesota. Local institutions have to think collaboratively to ensure that all youth are prepared to compete in the emerging global marketplace. However, we must bear in mind the educational research that suggests neither the years spent in central city schools nor the overreliance on standardized tests is sufficient to account for differences in the quality of education. Instead, major improvements in inner-city schools and community college systems are where the real changes must occur.

With respect to schools, there should be a return to the policy of regularly offering academic counseling and career guidance services to students. In today's urban high schools, students may not even know academic and career counselors exist in their school until they are referred there after a disciplinary infraction. Academic and career counselors must proactively communicate to students and parents such things as the value of taking higher-level math courses such as geometry and trigonometry, the importance of advanced placement courses to ensure good scores on standardized tests and increase the chances of earning scholarships and entry to good colleges, and career advice about what students can do with their education once earned. In addition, academic guidance counselors could serve as liaisons between local public schools and community colleges and universities. Direct partnerships between schools and local community colleges, in particular, could open pathways to college education for inner-city youth who may not have considered college to be an option.

Quite simply, such counseling is not happening equitably or at all in urban schools today. When young people are not asked by parents, teachers, or church leaders what they want to do with their lives after high school, there is a void in the space that the high school guidance counselor once filled. To remedy this situation, inner-city school districts should consider lobbying their legislatures for additional funds to hire academic and career counselors. In the short-term, school districts should consider redirecting money spent on security and educational assistants (a pseudonym for hall and class monitors) to hire academic and career counselors who would split their hours between several schools until permanent counselors can be placed at every school.

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